

# 10

## Tricks for Building Relationships with General Contractors

By  
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**F**or many construction professionals, sub-contracted work (work obtained under a general or prime contractor) can make up a large part of the yearly revenue. That's fine by itself, but sometimes selling your services to general contractors can prove elusive, even a little frustrating. After all, you punctually respond to their requests for bids, you're relatively sure that your pricing is competitive for your market, and you feel confident you have plenty of experienced manpower and equipment to tackle their jobs. But for some reason, you just don't seem to get the work come award time.

Not getting the work is bad enough, but when you factor in all the resources and office-time eaten up during the estimating process, the return on investment pales even further . . . and you can't afford to spin your wheels. Running a contracting firm is tough enough without wasting precious hours preparing quotes that don't deliver the necessary work. Yet if you don't deliver estimates, you're guaranteed to not get the work. So what do you do?

Often the key to obtaining work is not so much in the technical aspects of bidding and contracting as it is in more nontechnical areas of professionalism, reliability and relationship (the relationship with the general contractor, that is). As a subcontractor, if you can combine a program of committed client networking with an understanding of the motive forces behind the general contractor (who owns the potential to bring you repeat work), you can greatly enhance your chances for getting the

next job. You will need to do the networking part yourself. As far as understanding where the GC is coming from, let's take a look at a few tricks you can use to solidify your relationship.

### Selling Yourself

# #1

Despite what you may have heard or think, most GCs do not base their choice of a subcontractor on low price alone. The GC's philosophy goes something like this: In most cases we generate far more revenue through action (the action of building, that is) than we do by dissecting half-percent differences in sub-quotations that are normally "apples and oranges" anyway. Always, as we wade through our daily pile of subcontractor and supplier quotes, we hope in the back of our minds that the proposal we're examining right now is the one that's clear, complete and competitive (not dirty-low, just competitive) enough to meet the demands of the project, allowing us to move on to our next course of more profitable endeavors.

This isn't just rhetoric. I'm a GC, and many times over the years I've chosen to go with the second or third highest number simply because I felt more trusting and confident in that subcontractor's ability to get the job done. When weighing an \$80,000 subcontract line item, \$1,000 or \$2,000 is peanuts compared to the money that would be lost for non-performance or correction of faulty or non-complying work. Remember, too, that it's not just the cost of the fix that we worry about. There's also the corresponding drop in the GC's credibility that almost always seems to spawn other "concerns" from the project owner as the job goes along.

### Selling Yourself

# #2

If you're approaching a GC for the first time, work up a one-page

introductory (or re-introductory if it's simply been awhile) letter telling a little about your company. Don't make it too long and complex or it won't get read. Include your current address, phone/fax numbers, principals, key people, e-mail address (if you have one) and the services you offer.

Be specific about what you do. If, in addition to the conventional norm for your trade, you offer other services (such as a sitework contractor who also does dewatering, shoring, etc.), list it in your letter. Don't assume the GC knows everything about you and your company. That extra bit of information may get you the job.

## Selling Yourself **#3**

Follow up with a phone call to the prospect (in person is probably better; read on). Most CC estimators keep a file—computerized or written—of subcontractors and suppliers broken down by trade and often in CSI (Construction Specifications Institute) format. When a job comes up for bid, the estimator uses that file to send out bid invitations via postcards or bidfaxes to those subs and suppliers that are effected by the bid. When making your call, a good opening line is: "It's been awhile since we talked. I just wanted to see if you received my letter and update my information for your subcontractor list." Then, of course, add something new to say. The estimator will almost never just take the info and hang up (unless he's on a bid deadline—in which case you don't want to take up his time. Tell him you'll catch up later). Conversation

normally ensues, and that gives you a chance to fell him out about potential work opportunities.

## **#4** Selling Yourself

Offer to give budget numbers. GCs work up budgets for clients all the time. Having your budget number used up front increases the odds that they'll come back to you come "hard bid time, simply so that you won't have to repeat a lot of information.

## **#5** Selling Yourself

Subscribe to a reporting service like F.W. Dodge or Construction Market Data. These reports tell of construction projects that are coming out for bid in your area. The bidding GCs are normally listed (check this again at bid time; names will have been added), and details about the project are included. These reports also normally offer information on con-

tract awards, work in planning stages and negotiated work (where subcontractor proposals will be requested by one awarded GC). Armed with information from the reports, you'll be more knowledgeable and professional when talking with the GC. You'll know what's out there to bid, who's bidding and which GCs are getting all the work.

## Selling **#6** Yourself

Most subcontractors and suppliers (actually, most people in general) hate this one, but get out there and practice the age-old art of making the "cold call." This, of course, is where you walk in unannounced just to let them know you're around. Yes, this can be difficult to do, but never underestimate the power of social skill. I've seen it work too many times. Everyone, no matter how staunch and business-like they may appear, wants to work with someone they consider to be a friend. It's simple human nature.

## Selling Yourself **#7**

A little sidebar to the cold-call advice is that you may also pick up work just by being there. Here's how it works. Of-ten, in the GC's hectic daily grind, the importance of getting a job done "right now" far outweighs any minor advantages gained through hard-bidding (as explained earlier). You would be surprised how often (and how much) work I give away simply because the person was standing in front of me at the right time. And, I'm probably going to ask for some unit or T&M pricing, so be armed.

## Selling Yourself **#8**

The Proposal—Part I: I can testify that when reviewing and analyzing subcontractor proposals, there is a marked difference between the best and the worst in the bunch. Some are professional and complete. Some are incomprehensible

and illegible. It seems fundamental, but always be sure to submit clear, whole (all pricing, including alternates) and readable bid proposals. Submit on professional letterhead, and always include a phone number and contact person in case last-minute questions pop up on bid day . . . and they almost always do.

## #9

### Selling Yourself


The Proposal—Part II: Slapping a single base bid number page and faxing it around simply won't do. Today, virtually all CC bid proposals (especially larger or commercial jobs) require alternate, breakout or unit pricing to be submitted along with the GC's base bid. If not submitted, the GC may risk being disqualified. Here's your hook: the GC needs your numbers to complete this requirement.

Whenever possible, get a copy of the actual bid sheet (in the spec book) that lists all required bid pricing . . . and then go out of your way to offer assistance to the GC. It's just one

more thing that can separate you from the pack.

## Selling Yourself

## #10

Become familiar with—and even solicit—area manufacturers, hospitals, public utilities or any larger concern that often maintains their own construction or engineering departments. The benefits are twofold. You'll not only pick up work that these concerns choose to bid direct, but you'll also often find out about upcoming projects soon to be bid. They might even ask if you know a good GC. Pick one you like and give him a call to let him know you recommended him. The GC would be hard-pressed to not be grateful and obligated, should the job come to fruition. 

#### About the Author

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